

Civic Center's new boss faces old challenges

By Genie Campbell
Assistant feature editor

Since its inception more than a 100 years ago, Madison's Civic Center has been dogged by political controversy covering everything from the location of the facility to booking policies.

On Monday, a new director takes the helm, a fair-minded, unruffled man many members of the arts community see as the only leader capable of steering the Civic Center out of contention onto a smooth and financially sound course.

It's a tall order for one person to fill, but Ralph E. Sandler, 42, a long-time Madison resident and former director of the Union Theater, is committed to making the Civic Center succeed.

He knows the ropes, having already collaborated on two of the most successful bookings the Civic Center has hosted through a cooperative venture with the Union Theater — a 1980 engagement of "Chorus Line" and "Annie," playing Christmas week. All eight performances of the family musical were sold out weeks in advance.

That acts as a great endorsement for Sandler, especially since the Civic Center is facing a \$160,000 deficit above the \$384,000 subsidy for 1981 granted from the city.

Tuesday, the Madison City Council appropriated an additional \$129,300 to cover the cash shortage, but the difference, \$30,700, will have to be swallowed by 1982's budget. It is not the best way to begin a new job — in the hole.

"The biggest, No. 1 priority this coming year is establishing financial stability for the Civic Center," empha-

sized Sandler, who won't need a transitional period before getting down to business.

Sandler said he will be looking for more promoter-sponsored events in which facilities are rented at a flat rate, thus guaranteeing the Civic Center a set income.

"I'll also be taking a look at marketing approaches, see what has and hasn't been done . . . to try and increase attendance."

Sandler said during this current economic slump, the entertainment dollar can only be stretched so far.

"Obviously, the economy has had an effect. People are picking and choosing what they want to see a little more carefully, and, as a result, everyone has suffered to a certain degree," he continued, referring, in particular, to a period last spring and early summer when "too many things were going on at the same time" in Madison.

Wilson Street East was forced to close permanently. Union Theater was hurt, too, and the Civic Center incurred most of its losses at this time.

"But I think it's sorting itself out now," Sandler added.

He said the route to financial stability is through broadening the support base.

"There is an audience out there that has not been tapped. There are people who haven't come yet to enjoy the Civic Center." The key to reaching those people is through diversity of programming, Sandler added, naming two areas of music, country and jazz, he hopes to interject more actively into next year's programming.

Edgar Neiss, Sandler's predecessor who was recruited from Los Angeles in 1977 to head the Civic Center, re-



signed Oct. 16 to manage the Fox Theater Music House in Atlanta, Ga. Like Neiss, the new director will be walking a tight rope between the scheduling needs of local users, whose activities are financially subsidized by the city, and those of professional national acts which bring in the only revenue sorely needed by the Civic Center.

Sandler said a "primary purpose of the Civic Center is to serve as a home for local performance organizations" such as the four resident companies currently housed in the Civic Center — Madison Civic Music Association, Madison Civic Repertory Theater, Children's Theater of Madison and Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra.

He is also aware, however, that sometimes the scheduling demands of national acts will take precedence over those of local organizations.

"The tours of professional ensembles are set up to make sense with their travel arrangements. If we want

to participate in a tour we'll have to take the date or dates given to us. There is no flexibility; local performance groups have more flexibility.

One of the advantages Sandler has over Neiss is familiarity with territory. He is not an "outsider."

"I worked with many of these groups in both an administration and artistic capacity. They know me and where I stand. At times, sure, we will disagree. That is the nature of the beast. I represent the city. But we will, at least, go into negotiations with mutual respect for one another."

There are some things over which Sandler will not have any control. One is the escalating price of tickets for commercial events.

"It certainly is a problem. Tickets are high (in price) in comparison (with) what people are used to paying in Madison, but they are not high when compared to other metropolitan areas."

House presentations are budgeted to break even.

The cost of bringing in a major symphony orchestra for one night is \$30,000. Likewise, the cost of a single performance of a major theater road show is \$25,000, he said. To break even on "Annie," the Civic Center had to sell nearly \$250,000 worth of tickets.

Critics who angrily accuse the Civic Center administration of gearing its programming to the wealthy and urge the city to cut its subsidies, are only penalizing the local users, Sandler said.

"The city built the Civic Center with the intent that it be used by local organizations. It has an obligation to make it affordable to those groups."

Sandler has his work cut out for him during 1982, but there are also built-in joys with his new position.

"I'm looking forward to making it

work . . . opening the building up as it was intended to be used. During the Holiday Festival, 20,000 people came through here and people began to get a sense of the Civic Center's potential.

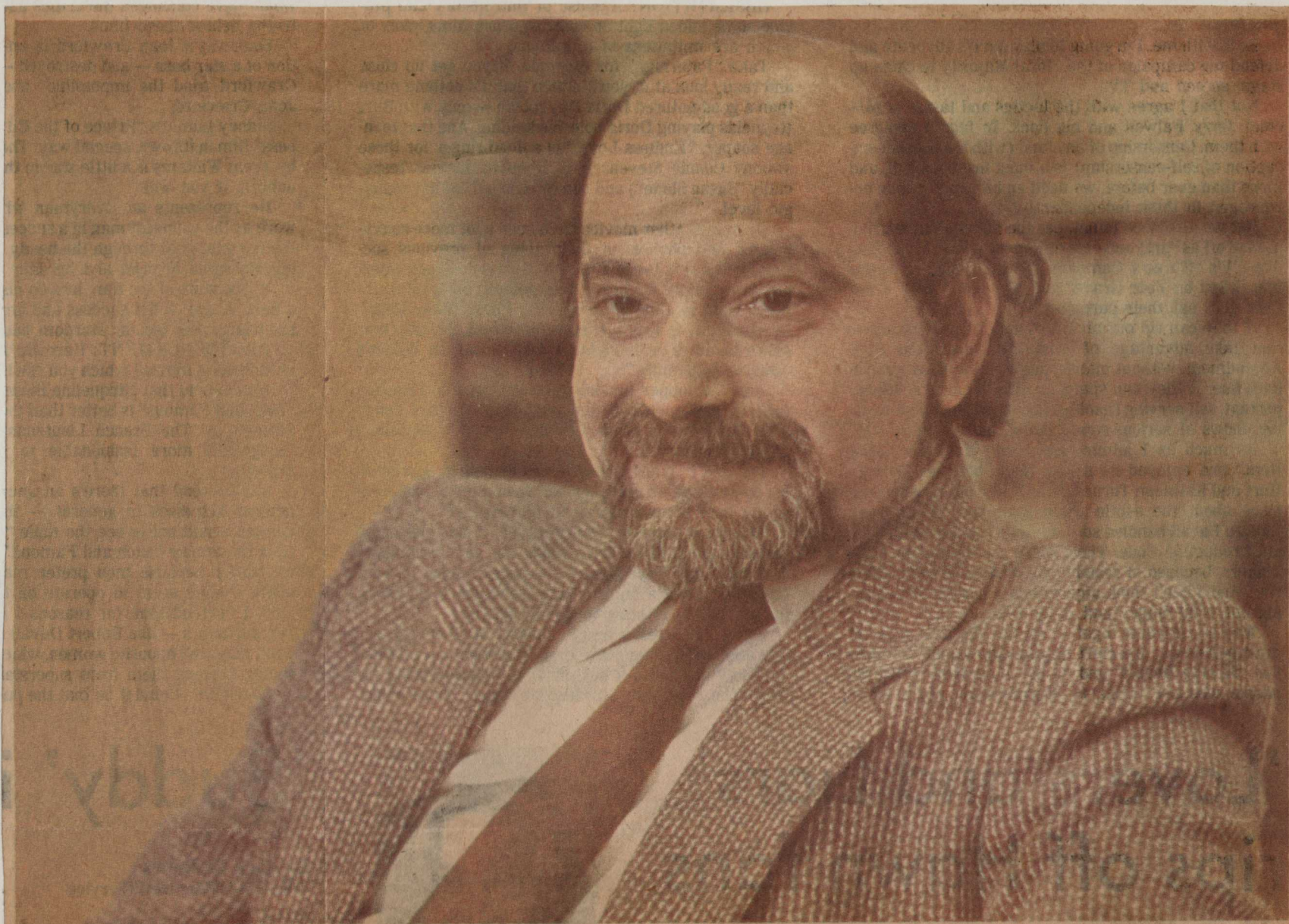
"I'm very interested in outreach programs; I want to get people here who have never been before."

Likewise, Sandler wants to use the resources of the Civic Center to reach into the community, to the people who can't afford to attend a show or are physically unable.

Although he doesn't officially take up his duties until Monday, he has already been at work, behind the scenes, studying the budget and booking acts for the 1982-83 season.

He wouldn't comment on any individual shows except to say "Evita," an award-winning, Broadway musical is a possibility.

His summation of the new season? "Terrific."



Former Union Theater director Ralph Sandler faces tough times ahead as new boss at the Madison Civic Center.

— State Journal color photo by L. Roger Turner

